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ABSTRACT

A graduate student at a large research university (later a teacher at a small state college in Arkansas) succumbed to, rebelled against, jumped into, and refrained from many varieties of mentoring and being mentored. Mentoring is like institutionalized parenting, containing exchanges analogous to the range of exchanges that happen between parent and child. The way the institution of mentoring is protected parallels the ways parenting is protected. With that protection, the possibilities of changing mentoring are limited, and that protection also makes it impossible to consciously disengage the practice of mentoring from the ramifications of the parenting metaphor. The oral transmission of secret knowledge--information about how a particular institution really works--lies at the heart of mentoring. In terms of mentoring in the academy, these knowledges collectively reveal a shadow institution. What the academy needs is mentoring as alchemy, mentoring as standing witness to personal and institutional transformation. Members of the academy need to investigate the dynamics and the codification of the discourse of mentoring, to recreate and revise its purposes. (RS)

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4Cs Roundtable: Mentoring Recomposed
4/2/93
CCCC 1993 San Diego CA

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Secret Life of a New Faculty Member

We proposed this discussion, and we hope it will be truly a discussion, because we believe that the practice of mentoring is ripe for critique. Current literature on mentoring, in general and in higher education, assumes that being mentored is an important, positive factor in success. As a graduate student at a large research university, now having been loosed upon a small state college in Arkansas, I've succumbed to, rebelled against, jumped into, and refrained from many varieties of mentoring and being mentored, but the rebelling and refraining has felt healthiest, which is where my critique, my recomposing begins. Where all this mentoring takes us, what people are mentored toward, what we're mentored for, seems crucial. An initial step in the critique is to begin naming and renaming.

In my recomposing of mentoring, the parenting metaphor is most useful. Mentoring seems so obviously institutionalized parenting, containing exchanges analogous to the range of exchanges that happen between parent and child. Everything that goes wrong and right in parenting goes wrong and right in mentoring. If you do or you would parent a child so that he or she might reflect you, extend you, compensate you or compensate for you, you will, I suggest, mentor in the same ways. And we come to be mentored in relation to how we have been parented; I've no doubt my resistance to being mentored reflects discomfort I felt as a child in my family. Popular books such as Joan Jeruchim's and Pat Shapiro's Women, Mentors, and Success exploit the connection between mentoring and parenting in analyzing mother-daughter and father-daughter pairing. Mentoring styles--ways of mentoring and ways of being mentored--seem to be formed by parenting styles--how we parent and how we were parented--on which there is much literature, both disheartening and invigorating. What we do not, if we accept this connection, interests me. For instance, it seems the ways in which we protect the institution of mentoring--by assuming its value and values, by assuming its naturalness and its necessity--parallels the ways in which we protect parenting, even in its antique and dangerous manifestations. With that protection, we limit possibilities of mentoring for change, and that protection also makes it impossible to consciously disengage the practice of mentoring from the ramifications of the parenting metaphor.

My recomposition of mentoring would also take into account that, like parenting, it depends on oral exchanges. That's so easy to forget in this world of reading and writing. I would even say that the oral transmission of secret knowledges--information

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about how a particular family or institution really works, information to be hidden, denied, or left unsaid--lies at the heart of mentoring. A major component of my secret life this year has been learning my university's secrets. Much of it is the usual thing, I expect--a financial officer "resigns," revealing a secret multimillion dollar fund he used at his discretion. All the profit from the copy machines in the library and the student bookstore is quietly funneled to athletics. Construction continues on our new library, topped by $50,000 worth of carrillion bells, but unbeknownst to 99% of the faculty and 100% of the students, no money was budgeted to furnish it.

There are more particular secrets to which I need access for my day-to-day activities: who tried to sleep with whose wife and therefore who cannot be expected to work together, who being seen with will enhance or damage one's reputation, in the eyes of whom, who will become livid at the thought of exchange grading final exams because his institutionalized function is not to teach but to shelter athletes from the rest of us who do. Most important for me, as a new director of composition, is the secret knowledge of whether or not gains in writing instruction and graduate education are desired, really desired, desired by whom, and who can facilitate my contribution to them. The transmission of such information, is oral, informal, private, and for the most part hierarchecal (one person knows and the other person doesn't; prestige comes from knowing). The nature of the communication is exclusive, often collusionary, and goal-oriented.

In terms of mentoring in the academy, these knowledges collectively reveal a shadow institution, to adapt a term Michael Zey uses to describe the informal, secret "political arena where the drama of power is enacted" (Jeruchim 127). The protection of mentoring, informally and institutionally, constitutues the protection of this shadow institution, even shadow disciplines. The protection is carried out through transactions in "secret" knowledges. These knowledges include personal, authoritative readings of the shadow academy, within and beyond particular institutions--readings of institutional processes, comparisons to other institutions, personalities, the dynamics of relationships, ramifications of events, personal histories, strategies for personal survival, strategies for professional survival, and strategies for defining and trafficking in power, which I would define as the ability to have and to deliver choices. Of course there are infinite variations on the relationships that comprise mentoring, but in a version that seems to be supported in academic and professional literature, mentoring works as an elaborate escort service, with introductions, recommendations, positions, publishing opportunities--choices--given in exchange for service, esteem, friendship, for reflected vitality and accomplishments, for vicarious thrills. What I want to know is, having just joined up in a big way, is this party worth going to? When I come to know what this party is all about, won't my intentions for remaining here change?

What we've got is mentoring for players, men and women, big and small. What we need is mentoring as alchemy, mentoring as

standing witness to personal and institutional transformation. We need to investigate the dynamics and the codification of the discourse of mentoring, to recreate and revise its purposes, strategies, and programs, formal and informal, to move from mentoring for players to mentoring for the witnessing of transformations, with the intent that those transformations necessarily benefit both the individual and the larger community. It's the process that holds our attention, it's the process that is beautiful, and the process should be situated in intention, which is almost everything.

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